

TODAY

People

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A feast worth celebrating

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By JAMIE BUCKINGHAM
Special to TODAY

This week, more than 5,000 Christians from 40 countries have gathered in Jerusalem in a massive display of support for the nation of Israel.

Sponsored by a group known as the International Christian Embassy, Jerusalem (ICEJ), these Christians have chosen the time of the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles (or Booths) to publicly endorse the right of Israel to be a nation.

Why the Tabernacles rather than the Christian holidays of Easter or Christmas?

The answer, according to Dutchman Jan Willem van der Hoeven, former warden of the Garden Tomb in Jerusalem and a director for ICEJ, is because Tabernacles is the only one of the three major Jewish festivals yet to be fulfilled in the Christian era.

Van der Hoeven, an ardent Christian Zionist and longtime resident of Israel, points out that Passover, celebrated by Jews to commemorate the time the death angel "passed over" the homes of Hebrew slaves in Egypt, was fulfilled with the death of Jesus Christ.

The Jewish Feast of Pentecost, or firstfruits, had its fulfillment with the arrival of the Holy Spirit after Christ's ascension.

Only the Feast of Tabernacles remains unfulfilled. According to the prophet Zechariah, this feast is to be kept by all nations when the Messiah comes to reign over the entire world from Jerusalem. Christian scholars refer to this as Jesus' second coming (Zechariah 14:16).

The Jewish meaning of the Tabernacles, celebrated this year from Sept. 22-29, is three-fold.

The first is to remember the time the Israelites escaped Egypt and lived in the wilderness in booths — or succoths. This is symbolized this week by Jews all over the world who have built small booths of palm branches in front of their homes and synagogues.

The second meaning celebrates the harvest festival, or gathering of the barley crop.

The final meaning is the Simcha Torah (Joy of the Law) which honors the giving of the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai.

The Tabernacles — or Feast of Booths — is actually the final event of a series of holidays which started on Sept. 7 with the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashana, and culminated with Yom Kippur, the day of atonement, on Sept. 17.

While these first two holidays are solemn, the Tabernacles is a seven-day festival of joy.

Over the last three years something spectacular has happened during the Tabernacles feast in Jerusalem. Christians by the thousands have flocked to Israel to join with Jews in celebrating this joyous time.

It began in the summer of 1980 when Prime Minister Menachem Begin boldly proclaimed the city of Jerusalem as the "eternal capital" for Israel.

For Jewish people — and a good many Christians — the new law was a long-awaited cause of rejoicing.

Others reacted with violent anger. Overnight, cries of protest and condemnation came from around the world.

The Arab nations put immediate pressure on those nations dependent on them for oil. In rapid succession, 13 nations closed their embassies and withdrew from Jerusalem. Even the United States and Holland, Israel's staunch allies, deplored the move to declare Jerusalem a unified city under Jewish rule.

The Jewish people, accustomed to world-wide anti-Semitism, could only view this as

another sign of rejection of their right to rule their own land. Once again they felt they stood alone in a hostile world.

It was during that dark period that van der Hoeven and a small group of Christians living in Israel felt it was time for the Christians of the world to band together in support of Israel.

They chose the Feast of Tabernacles for their first pro-Israel rally. More than 1,000 Christians from 23 nations gathered that year to say, "Israel, you are not alone."

On Sept. 23, 1980, the group formed the International Christian Embassy, Jerusalem. At a ceremony, attended by Israeli

officials, they issued a statement saying, "Though the world rejects you, we will not forsake you." Deeply moved, Jerusalem Mayor Teddy Kollek told the crowd, "Those embassies which left us represented only governments — you represent the people." Shortly afterwards, the ICEJ moved into the deserted

Chilean Embassy in the new sector of Jerusalem.

Today a staff of 30, many of them full-time volunteers, run the embassy and travel throughout the world promoting the causes of Israel. According to South African Johann Luckhoff, ICEJ director, the organization is not an embassy in the sense that it represents a country. Neither does it presume to speak for the entire Christian world.

But it is an embassy in that it represents multitudes of like-minded persons around the world who understand the prophetic significance of Israel's restoration and share a deep love for the Jewish people.

The ICEJ staffs fulltime embassies in 22 nations. The United States embassy, located in Montreat, N.C., is run by nine workers. Consulates and branches, some with fulltime directors, others staffed with volunteers, are located in a number of key cities, including Florida branches in Jacksonville, Miami, Bradenton and Orlando.

Aside from its work of raising the awareness level of world Christians on behalf of Israel, the most significant accomplishment of the ICEJ has been the huge rallies in Jerusalem during the Tabernacles feast.

This year more than 5,000 representing 40 nations will gather in Jerusalem's huge assembly hall, Benyanai HuUma, for the festive occasion. They will march through the streets of the old city and hold joint worship services with Christians singing and dancing to Jewish music.

Seminar leaders include a host of well-known Christian leaders including Derek Prince, a British-American now living in Jerusalem; Art Carlson of Project Kibbutz, who heads up a program which places Christian young people on Jewish farms and Ralph Mahoney of the World Missionary Assistance Plan in California.

Friday afternoon, the Christian pilgrims will gather at the Mount of Olives and march through the streets to Jerusalem to the Western Wall in a mass demonstration of national and religious unity.

Wearing colorful costumes of their nations, they will carry thousands of banners signifying their support of Israel.

A similar march is scheduled Tuesday to demonstrate the group's solidarity for Soviet Jewry, now held in the U.S.S.R. against their will.

Wednesday, pilgrims will be bused from Jerusalem into the Negev desert near the Dead Sea for an outdoor Biblical dinner held at the Caves of Qumran. Under desert stars, they will sing Christian songs and dance the Jewish hora.

While the purpose of most Christian missions in Israel is to convert Jews to Christianity, ICEJ is stately non-evangelistic.

Although made up of evangelicals, fundamentalists and Charismatic Christians who are uncompromising in their faith, the direction for the embassy is to support, not evangelize, the nation of Israel.

This has caused some evangelical Christians to question the legitimacy of ICEJ as a major Christian voice in Israel. However, according to Jim Jackson, embassy director for the U.S. branch of ICEJ, "As a strong evangelical Christian I believe there is not other way of salvation except through Jesus Christ."

"But, I believe my love for the nation of Israel as God's chosen people will waken in all the sons of Judah the love of God."

"My task is to love Jews and to love Jesus. How they respond is between them and God."

In 1981, former Prime Minister Begin attended the conference, later telling the Keneset, it was the greatest Zionist meeting he had ever attended.

ICEJ's unique approach to Judaism prompted Chief Rabbi Shlomo Goren to say to the embassy's leaders, "Your presence here with us during the Feast of Tabernacles is to us Jews a sign that we are close to the Messianic period, for our prophet Zechariah said during Messiah's reign all the nations of the world will come up to celebrate the Feast with us."